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HOW TO LOOK AT A PICTURE.

THE following article was published in *The Studio and Musical Review*, a paper issued for a number of weeks in 1881. The writer's explication of the proper consideration of this matter will be interesting and valuable to our readers:

It is not with the desire to lay down laws, but to point out principles, that the following hints are written. These principles of seeing have not been forced upon our public, though generally recognized by professional artists. Even critics in this country seem frequently to have neglected them. As new generations of picture-seers and picture-buyers come upon the scene, the same guides need to be offered, and as *The Studio* hopes to help the young by its counsel, as well as win the old by its well-balanced judgments, the suggestions contained in this paper may not be out of place.

The first principle that is to be noted is that of the proper focal distance to be chosen when looking at a painting or drawing. The natural distance for a normal eye is conceded to be three times the diagonal of the picture. The principle can be easily verified. Take a carte-de-visite photograph and hold it near the eye, then distance it until, without moving the eye-ball in the socket, you can comfortably include the whole picture in your field of vision; then measure the distance at which you are holding the card from the eye, and the chances are that you will find the measurement related to the diagonal of the card as three is to one. To see a figure six feet high properly, one needs to be eighteen away. Here we have a hint for the placing of pictures in a room so that they may have an acceptable focal distance; and here, too, we have a guide to a solution of the question of finish.

It is doubtless true that nature is perfectly finished, even under the microscope. but a work of art must simply *appear* to be finished at some well understood focal distance. It seems reasonable, then, to make that perfect appearance coincide with the natural focal measurement of the healthy vision of the average spectator.

Visitors to our galleries have formed bad habits by misunderstanding the aim of a good work of art. This is to impress us as a whole with some sentiment of beauty or grandeur, inspire us or delight us, or even disgust us sometimes; but the impression must be produced, else in so far the work fails. Every detail consistent with the development of the feeling in the spectator which inspired the artist should, at the chosen distance, look perfect. It matters not how the result is brought about when we come to examine it closely, if the purpose for which it was introduced is fulfilled where all the other parts are in harmony with it. A blotchy daub a foot square that assumes no shape until we have crossed the gallery, is as false in method as the other extreme of a canvas six feet across which means nothing to us when we are more than six feet away and can, consequently, see perfectly but two feet of its surface, and must take it in by thirds.

As artists have so often neglected this rule, which may be assumed to be a law of vision, it is not surprising that the public is confused in its manner of examining the works of our painters. Even hanging committees, who are supposed to consult the best interests of artists and the public, fail in this respect, and frequently force us to smell of huge works, and banish to the upper regions small masterpieces which, if worthy a place on the walls, one would think might be placed where they could be seen. But until we have gutta-percha rooms elastic enough to give the aspirants for fame a place on the line, these much-to-be-desired attentions will not be paid.

J. W. C.

IN the June number of the ART UNION, President Huntington of the National Academy will contribute an article on the Prado galleries of Madrid, A. J. Conant will discuss various art matters of current interest, and the long deferred article on the Philadelphia Academy schools will also be given a place.

INFLUENCE AND INDIVIDUALITY.

SOME FURTHER CONVERSATION WITH WILLIAM HART.

THE remarks of Mr. William Hart—published in a former number of THE ART UNION—concerning the copying of an artist's methods by his pupils—appear to have been appreciated more by artists than by critics. The difficulty with the average critic has been that he has made no distinction between the legitimate influence of the master, shown in the pupil's work, and the downright copying of the former by the latter. In a conversation with Mr. Hart a few days ago, he recurred to the subjects of our former conversation, and among other things, said:

"What an abused word 'school' is, in its artistic application! I am profoundly grateful that there is no 'school,' in the commonly accepted sense, in this country, save the sorry importations from Paris and Munich. It has always seemed to me that the total absence of 'school' in England was very much to the credit of English art, and spoke volumes for the honesty and sincerity of the English artists.

"An artist reasons upon art from the recollection of the pictures he has seen, the men he has known and from his own experience. I could not treat the question of 'Influence and individuality' abstractly, and discuss it from some point away up in the clouds, as do the great art critics, I must take an artist, a great one, and analyze his career.

"Suppose we take Turner, the great English artist. He began with terrible obstacles in his way, and by conquering these, one by one, he made himself the great artist that he was. Reading his early history, we are sorry for him; we are surprised at the stupidity of the world that did not instantly recognize him. But hold! we are wrong; our sorrow is misplaced; his hard experiences were the rubs that polished the diamond and gave it that transcendent lustre which we associate with the name of Turner. Yet, this only in part; besides the original genius in the poor barber boy, there was much hearty art food that he devoured and assimilated. How does the stalwart six-foot man come from the puny babe? Simply from the food he has digested throughout the years, and which has built him up. It is so with the artist. If he can assimilate, he can grow. If he cannot, he will remain an art-babe to the end of his days. I can recall many art-babes who were prodigies at seventeen, yet who never grew an inch afterwards. They could not assimilate, and hence remained stationary in art.

"Turner had a prodigious appetite. He fed lustily on many things. If I could give a list of all the works he ever painted, I could name the art-food he was assimilating through the different periods of his life. In the earlier portion of his career, his associate, Girtin, had a great influence upon him. There was a depth in Girtin's work of which Turner was not capable at that time, and the latter, either consciously or unconsciously, began to copy that which he admired in the work of his contemporary. Turner and Girtin were born the same year, yet it has always seemed to me as if Girtin must have had the nature of an older man than his friend, to whom it is my fancy to regard him

as having been a sort of protector and adviser. Both of them were hired by Dr. Monks to come to his house and make drawings at half a crown a night and a supper thrown in. Girtin possessed much solid power, with a strain of sadness thrown in, which was very charming. All this could not fail to impress deeply the sensitive Turner, whose earliest inspiration was probably the drop curtain of a theatre, and who must have nourished strange, fantastic ideals of color and form, which were repressed by the influence of the older men. Girtin was Turner's tonic at a time when he needed tonics.

"It would be difficult to determine how the thought awoke in Turner's mind to become an artist. His father shaved Stothard and other artists, and there is a story told that Turner once accompanied his father to a house in the neighborhood, to take a lesson in dressing hair, but that his attention was so taken up by a coat-of-arms, which he saw on the table, that he noted little of the business to which he then appeared to be destined, but after he returned home, made a drawing from memory from the coat-of-arms, which greatly pleased his father, and probably led to his being allowed to devote a portion of his time to the study of art.

"Turner probably had the advantage of many private galleries for his inspiration, and it is clear that he was very greatly influenced by a number of men. He was carried away for awhile, with imitations of Claude Lorraine, Cuyp and Ruysdael. He painted pictures in the manner of these men, which were *de facto* copies. I remember having seen one which I thought was a Cuyp: there were cottages and a wind-mill, with great breadth of composition. In Turner's earliest manner, there was a manifest imitation of the Dutch masters, but while he was making these imitations, he was also studying tremendously. He was sketching from Nature almost constantly, imbibing numberless impressions of natural scenery. While he copied the masters, he compared them with Nature; he analyzed both and contrasted his views of what was before his eyes, with their views as expressed in their works. This brought him to the discovery that he could see more than they had been able to see; that he could express sunlight better than could Claude, and water better than could Ruysdael. He found that in space he could indicate leagues where Claude could only represent furlongs, but he also found that in it he could never give the soul-qualities in Cuyp or Ruysdael. In every work of the former there is the expression of an intense enjoyment of Nature; in every picture of the latter there is enveloped a sweet and touching sadness. Then Turner broke away from the influences he could not compass, retaining all that he could assimilate, rejecting imitation of those points that he could not fathom, and developing the long retained, long repressed, orientalism of his nature. His pictures became in art, what the "Arabian Nights" are in literature. It must have been the realization of his boyish dreams to be able to develop the fancies of his painful youth, when Nature first revealed herself to him in visions of iridescent color. Values he never learned, in the common acceptance of the term, but his gradations were so full that this ignorance was compensated for. So he built himself up. If you

look at his pictures, you can feel Claude, but you can feel Turner also; you can feel Cuyp, but Turner is with him too. You can feel that Turner has studied the sea currents and the tides as man never did before him, and in this he is far, far beyond Ruysdael.

"Had Turner never gone beyond the copying of these men, he would have been unworthy of criticism. The obvious imitations he made of them were done at a time when he was trying to comprehend them, trying to put himself into their condition in order that he might learn to read Nature with their eyes and then determine which was the better, what they saw or what he saw.

"Turner was influenced by other men without becoming a slave to any of them, and his example clearly demonstrates the difference between legitimate and illegitimate influence."

"SCHOOLS" IN ART.

"You think, Mr. Hart, that 'Schools' in Art are bad;—Will you kindly define what you mean by a 'school' in art, and show in what respect such a thing is bad?"

"We generally understand by 'school' the effect of a great genius upon contemporary art. He is surrounded by pupils, who aspire to learn from him the magic of his coloring, the dexterity of his touch. There is a doubt in my mind whether, under any circumstances, a master can convey to a pupil anything beyond the principles upon which he builds his pictures—the laws relating to general harmony, etc.—all of which could be told in the lecture-room even better than in the studio. If the pupil cannot comprehend them when enunciated in a lecture, how is he to understand them when developed in a picture, where they undergo the modification peculiar to the individuality of each genuine artist?"

"In the expression of Nature there are what an astronomer would call perturbations, and these are the marks of individuality that designate genius. Were it otherwise, the works of all the great painters would be alike, because true artists, who understand the underlying principles of art, work intuitively in harmony with them. Take, for example, the value of a white in shadow, in the foreground—as white clouds in shadow in the sky, with openings of pure blue between them. That is an effect to be seen in many pictures by different masters; and in the most perfect works, we get a feeling that the same palette produced them all, though they may be separated by long lengths of centuries, and great stretches of distance between their countries. All of these pictures may be, at the same time, totally different in effect and feeling. The one illustrates especially the vicinage of Rome and is steeped in Italian art and color; a second is a bit cut from the lowlands of Holland, and a third comes from the leafy, rural districts of England. To the uninstructed spectator, there is not a particle of resemblance; to the artist, the tones bring the same delicious music, and the palette of one is the palette of all. This is the true art 'school,'—but how shall this be taught to pupils? I know of no way save through the lecture room. The great difficulty, however, is, that the grand harmonies of painting are not to be learned easily. The artist who knows, can proclaim aloud all that he knows, but that will not give comprehension to his pupils. No amount

of mere explanation of *chiar-oscuro* will enable them to embody it in their works intelligently, or even understand it. A diligent student can learn partially to comprehend it in black-and-white, from the study of Rembrandt's etchings, but let it be translated into color, and it goes from him. It is so subtle that he cannot discern it, or so complex that it confuses him. What power can the master give to his pupils to comprehend what is warm or what is cold in color? This discernment is a natural gift of the eye, just as the discrimination between 'sharps,' 'flats' and 'naturals' in music, is a natural gift of the ear.

"Let us imagine the result had Turner been willing to teach and become a professor. We see him surrounded by shoals of pupils, eager to learn the great Turnerian secrets of landscape. They describe themselves as the landscape school of the great Turner, and naturally deride all other landscape schools, past, present and to come. They set up their easels in a great studio, and watch the master paint. His methods are—must be—chaos to them, but they must follow him, and empirically they do so. The most trusted of them fight for the honor of preparing his palette, and by dint of watching, learn his combinations of color. It is to be noted that these must be according to the laws of color which they could learn in a lecture-room—for if they are not, they are bad, and will be destroyed by time and will pass out of the memory of mankind. The pupils copy what they see; that is their business in the studio, and the best pupil is the one who is the most adroit monkey.

"A genius is, of necessity, uneven and fitful. When a master is unsuccessful in a picture, his mannerisms are all the more evident, and his 'padding' becomes conspicuous. But the pupil copies it all, dwelling upon the peculiarities,—the things excused in the master on account of his good qualities. Many of his foregrounds are simply preludes, or introductions to the real pictures, which are to be found in the exquisite backgrounds. Take the Turner belonging to Mr. William H. Vanderbilt:—there is a foreground in which are trees, a cascade, a fountain, some fairies and some architecture, I believe. I see in that picture, however, only the background, with its infinite stretch of gradations and such light in the sky as dims everything near it. Persons ask me about it, and I tell them I can conceive of nothing finer in landscape. But, they say: 'Do you like the nymphs and the fountain?' I tell them that the background caught my eyes and held them there, and that I never saw the foreground at all. But what would pupils do with such a picture before them? They would pick out, probably, what was easiest, and endeavor to copy it. It would not be difficult to paint a tree as Turner did, so that it would pass muster as a Turner tree, but a Turner distance is another matter. The infinite gradations of his background, containing the soul and substance of his exquisite thought, could not be copied by them, and they would almost naturally leave it alone. The somewhat cheap magnificence of Turner's foregrounds, and his real mannerisms, shown in his cloudy rocks, imposing temples, and careless, ill-drawn figures—used simply for the distribution of masses of light and dark in color—and oft repeated trees, could be and would be

copied by the men of his school, and a great deal that these men would do would come to be regarded as essentially characteristic of Turner,—for when the pupils could not comprehend, it is pretty certain the public would not. It is probably no stretch of the fact to say that Turner is estimated by the world at large not by the really great qualities that his works possess, but by the mannerisms that were his besetting sins, the result of early prepossessions,—intuitive feelings, or too often, haste in picture-making.

What pupil would analyze Turner's water-lines and compare them with Nature through a long course of difficult sketches fraught with physical pain and danger? No one. Everything would be rejected that was not a vehicle of magnificent and fantastic color. The consequence would be, that even in the master's lifetime, the school would be distinguished by chaotic composition, forcible but illegitimate presentations of color, and theatrical or mere tri-cious affections of *chiar-oscuro*. After his death, the school would depart further and further from the true principles of its head, until finally it would arrive at the color craziness of untaught effort, and would disappear with the universal contempt of the world cast upon it.

"'Schools'—so called—are a humbug. The English have always rejected them, from that innate detestation of dishonesty which is characteristic of the people. I really think that England has had more great masters within the last two centuries than has any other country, yet, not one of these ever founded a school, or, in other words, founded a host of imitators. All of these really great men built themselves up by assimilating art-knowledge from preceding great masters. Sir Joshua Reynolds, Gainsborough, Richard Wilson, 'Old Crome,' Wilkie, Constable, Turner, Stothard and Hogarth, all profited by wholesome influences that built them up without destroying their individuality.

"Copying is the refuge of the weak and the young. Assimilation is learning. If you consider the nature of a true artist, you must see what a vast part influences have in his formation. He ripens slowly, in proportion to his universality of comprehension. If he is one capable of making every chord of Art vibrate simultaneously, if he thus blends the harmonies of many in himself, he cannot be formed rapidly; his progress cannot be too deliberate, direct or determined. What a length of time will it not take to ripen such an individuality! At first it is unconscious of its power and its privileges, because that power is so multifarious. What crude essays! What gropings in the dark! What palpable inroads upon the domains of others! What mixtures of styles must be passed through before it blossoms into individuality, and the true master reveals his strength and takes his place among the immortal ones of Art!"

THE SYRACUSE ART CLUB's first exhibition, which closed May 19, was very successful. A number of prominent New York artists were well represented, and the collection of paintings, judging from the names and titles in the catalogue, was one to command respect. The exhibition is reported as having been well attended, but no list of sales has been furnished us.